

DANCING WITH THE RIVER

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Box Canyon water is ripe for running

The Box Canyon section of the upper Sacramento River is a combination of chaos and calm and an attraction for many expert kayakers.

MOUNT SHASTA - The upper Sacramento River forms a smooth tapestry as it glides down the 220-foot face of the Box Canyon Dam.

At the bottom, the symmetry ends as the river emerges into a chaotic stretch of Class IV white water.

The run is an ideal playground for expert kayakers: A mix between violence and solace.

Navigating the section is like a performing art.

"If you think of it as being a dance, the river always leads," explains kayaker Eric Petlock of Anderson. "It's like dancing with a person. The more you dance with someone, the more you learn the subtleties of how they move."

Petlock has been learning the moves of the upper Sacramento for three seasons, but none will be better than this one. The region's heavy snowpack assures that the dancing will continue well into the summer months.

"This will be the best white water season we've had in 10 years," said Lief Hansen, owner of Cutting Edge Adventures in Mount Shasta.

Hansen said the Box Canyon stretch will be runnable through mid-June and some stretches to Dunsmuir could last into July. Both kayakers have been enjoying the upper Sacramento because of its beauty and accessibility.

A narrow slit through a towering rock corridor, the Sacramento staircases its way down to Cantara Loop. Every section is a postcard.

Kayakers can paddle a 2 1/2-mile stretch from the dam to Cantara Loop in under an hour, making for a perfect after-work run. For a longer tour, they can travel from the dam to Dunsmuir in about three hours. The longer stretch takes paddlers through borderline Class V sections known as Fender Bender and Nemesis.

While Class IV water tests a kayaker's skills, Class V pushes those skills to the breaking point.

A couple of minutes of battling rapids does plenty to purify the problems of the day.

"So many times in our everyday lives there's a whole lot of background noise and worries, concerns and fears," Hansen said. "When you're running these rapids you're not thinking about any of that stuff. You focus on one thing, and if you do it right then it's very easy. If you do it wrong, then you get spanked and have to do it all over again."

Experts make difficult stretches of white water look effortless. The skill comes from countless hours of mistakes on the river.

"You watch a skilled kayaker come through a rapid and appear to be half-asleep," Hansen said. "Someone who's not as experienced will be paddling for their lives."

"To become part of the river, it's just a skill that you learn over time." Hansen compares Class IV water to a skier learning to gracefully traverse an expert run. The comparison also works for activities such as rock climbing, mountain biking, even ice skating.

"In all of these sports, if it's hard you're doing it wrong," Hansen said. "When you become skilled at any one of them you use the forces of nature. In kayaking you use the power of the water, you use the rocks creating eddies and waves, and you use the position and design of the boat."

For the Box Canyon run, it's a skill just getting down to the river.

Kayakers trek from the top of the dam to the drop area via a steep but fairly traversable trail (a climbing rope and iron ladder make the descent less arduous). From the bottom, the dam provides a monolithic yet somehow natural backdrop.

"One of the reasons I learned to kayak is it's a perfect vehicle to take you into places that are hard to get to," Hansen said. "To have a Class IV section of white water that's this continuous in such a tight little gorge is very rare."

But Hansen warns that the run isn't for everyone. Inexperienced boaters should sharpen their skills on less turbid waters before challenging the upper Sacramento.

"We always stress that it's Class IV, and more of a challenging run," said Hansen, who's been doing the section for eight years. "It's definitely not for beginning kayakers. It's really not even for intermediate kayakers."

Perfecting a run through a difficult section of rapids offers more than a sense of accomplishment; it borders on controlling the uncontrollable.

"I like the idea of being in an environment that seems totally chaotic and uncontrollable yet you learn to interact with the river in a controlled way," Petlock said. "That's the thing that's funny about it - it's so chaotic and yet it's so calm."

- Caption: Leif Hansen of Mount Shasta navigates his kayak through a challenging section of white water near Cantara Loop. The trek from Box Canyon Dam to the Sacramento River includes some tricky maneuvers outside of the boat. Anderson kayaker Eric Petlock finds a calm spot on the often violent stretch through Box Canyon. Michael Burke

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